

Stranded skiers feared they'd be buried alive on mountain

By Kim Thompson
Special to The Province

For two skiers prepared for the worst, a four-day trip in the Whistler backcountry turned into a test of survival.

Geoffery Orr, 29, and Michal Opolsky, 26, were found after an intensive search by RCMP and Whistler Search and Rescue on Friday.

The two North Vancouver men had been reported overdue on a trip into the Spearhead Traverse, an area between Whistler and Blackcomb mountains. As experienced mountaineers, Orr and Opolsky told family members to call SAR if they were not back by Wednesday at the latest.

"We negotiated for 18 hours and finally made the call to Search and Rescue at 7 p.m. on Wednesday," said Andrea Rodman, Orr's girlfriend. "We spent all night waiting and finally came up to Whistler to help."

As bad weather on Thursday hampered search efforts, the skiers hunkered down in an ice cave. They had tried to move back to their last known position just as clouds rolled in. According to Orr, metres of snow forced the pair from their makeshift shelter just before a major storm hit.

"The toughest part was finding a place to pitch our tent," Orr said. "Once we were in the tent, it was like World War 2 because 150-km/h winds threatened to flatten us. We were worried of being buried alive, but as soon as the snow piled up, the wind would



Bonny Makarewicz — for The Province

Rescued skiers Geoff Orr (left) and Michal Opolsky (centre) emerge after they were rescued Friday near Platform Glacier. The pair were three days overdue. Rescue worker Doug Brown is at right.

While the skiers battled the elements, two helicopters and three ground-search teams were unleashed on the Spearhead Traverse Friday. Rescuers hoped the skiers were not trying to move, because of the increased level of avalanche risk after 50 to 60 centimetres of snow fell within 24 hours.

"Wind slabs were created, mak-

ing avalanches," said Brad Sills of Whistler Search and Rescue. "The skiers were last spotted on Platform Glacier on Sunday, which is a heavily glaciated area with wide crevasses due to a low snowpack."

Despite clearing skies, the Platform Glacier area remained fogged in and inaccessible to rescue teams for most of Friday. Ground crews looked for any indication

Rescuers estimated that Orr and Opolsky were stuck about a day's hike from Blackcomb and close to the last point they were seen.

"The hard part was the waiting in zero visibility and hearing the choppers overhead. We wanted to get out of there so bad, but we knew it was not the time to go anywhere," Orr said.

Late Friday afternoon, blue sky

form Glacier area. Although tired of cold mashed potatoes, the skiers emerged from their tent healthy enough to ski down to the helicopter. "I thought, 'Oh my God, it's blue sky and we are going home,'" Orr said.

Family members breathed sighs of relief as the news reached Whistler Village. According to Michelle Nisbett, Whistler RCMP's spokeswoman, Orr and Opolsky were found two kilometres from where they were last seen.

The men were airlifted out and reunited with family members. Opolsky said that by eating as little as possible they stretched their four-day provisions.

"We are just excited to be back and be among family and friends," Orr said. "There was no room for bad decisions."

The backcountry knowledge shared by Orr and Opolsky played a major part in their safe return. Often compared to the famous traverse between Chamonix and Zemat in Europe, the Spearhead Traverse is not to be taken lightly. The trip spans 18 different glaciers and demands skiers versed in avalanche-rescue and mountaineering techniques.

Rob McCurdy of the Whistler Alpine Guides Bureau believes that staying put is the best option in bad weather.

"There is never a guarantee of weather in the backcountry. Being ready to expect the unexpected is part of our philosophy," McCurdy said. "We bring along a GPS and satellite phone to give us the